THE WORLD'S LINCOLN

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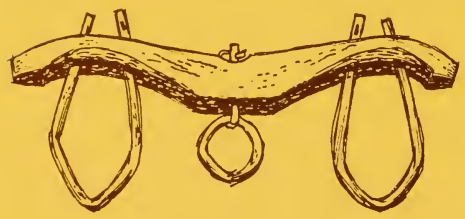

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THE WORLD'S LINCOLN

By

JOHN DRINKWATER

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THE WORLD'S LINCOLN

CIENTIFIC accuracy is, & rightly, dear to the heart of the modern historian; and yet, the more we study history, the more difficult of attainment does it seem to be. When all the archives have been ransacked, and every document scrutinised to the last flourish of a letter, how little, we realise, is known of the literal facts after all, how much of high significance in character and event has escaped the most patient investigation. No tale of things that actually came to pass on earth is ever even half told, and the stoutest record would seem hardly more than a marginal note if we knew all.

And, scanty as our information may be, how seldom are we sure that even so little is indisputable. Figures of distant ages, greatly notable in their day, and freely noted by the chroniclers, survive mostly

in very doubtful fidelity to the originals, and figures notable for all time are often indistinct almost to the point of invisibility. Would it not seem to have been inconceivable that the supreme man of the modern world, Shakespeare, should within three hundred years of his death have been so completely effaced from biographical memory that the new and authoritative dating of any single moment in his life would make a scholar's reputation; that, indeed, there is acrimonious debate as to whether he ever existed at all? It may well be that we are content to know no more of him than is revealed by his work, but it is none the less a miracle that Shakespeare the man has become no more than a spectral surmise.

But even where the witnesses have been diligent, more than much remains in obscurity. Boswell on Johnson and Pepys on himself tell us a great deal that is significant, but their copious notes leave untold more than they tell. It must inevitably be so. The full story of a man's life would take as long to read as to live, and twenty times as long to write. The amplest compilation of facts, say Lockhart on Scott or Moore on Byron, amounts at last to a slight and more or less fortuitous selection. Far from being regrettable, this is fortunate; but it is a fact.

If, however, it is remarkable that our knowledge

of a poet who lived three hundred years ago should be sparse and unreliable, it is far more so that there should be doubt and difficulty about the lives of men who were figures of close public attention within living memory. But such doubt and difficulty there are. Popular conceptions of great men who a generation ago were the staple of daily news, founded apparently on secure evidence, are continually being challenged, sometimes wantonly, sometimes in good faith. The virtues of common report were, it seems, but the cloak of sad infirmities after all; the loyalty was carefully disposed by self-interest; the chivalry was lewd at heart; the fortitude was arrogance; and the vision was false. All of which may be true, or it may not. The challenge, no doubt, is plausibly supported; documents can be made to support anything if you have enough of them to choose from. Nelson possibly was a coward, and someone may have evidence up his sleeve to prove it. But the important thing is not the assurance that sooner or later truth will out, but that there comes a time when certain convictions are so firmly established that they become proof against any spectacular revelations, become, that is, the potent truth itself, no matter what excavation of facts may threaten it. If a select committee of the High Courts of the world were to de-

cide on an impartial examination of the evidence that Nelson was a coward, we should laugh in their faces.

No public man in the western world during the past seventy years or so has been more minutely observed than Abraham Lincoln. History hardly affords so striking an instance of a man taking on an epic significance while the daily habit of his life is still a matter of familiar recollection. And yet already the story of Lincoln is the subject of historical disputation. Not only is he the great American, the beloved symbol in which a nation of over a hundred million people sees itself exalted; he is also accepted by the world, or by the western world at any rate, as a statesman by whom office was dignified with an almost unexampled splendour of character. Such a one, it might have been supposed, would have been presented to us with absolute authority, with an assurance of mood and feature that none could call in question. A man so deeply contemplated and so devoutly esteemed must surely stand before us at least precisely for what he is, with no hesitancy of countenance or obscured definition. The more so when, as with Lincoln, the records of all kinds are so plentiful and elaborate. Photographers, draughtsmen, diarists, biographers official and unofficial, state reporters, poets,

novelists, historians, generals and cabinet ministers, from all these we have a vast accumulation of testimony as to the very feature and character of Lincoln. And the testimony is supplemented by an active popular tradition based largely on personal contacts. The man who has already taken his place among the universal figures was the friend of men still living, and at the distance of a single generation is in intimate association with, I suppose, hundreds of American families. I have remarked elsewhere on the emotion with which a stranger may thus find himself within a step of the actual presence of a hero almost fabulous in stature, of Mr. Lincoln, as he still is in familiar conversation. I myself have sat talking with his son in a room overlooking the Potomac, the river that was the material token of a division that went near to breaking the father's heart. In my copy of a book called 'Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln' there is written the following inscription: 'The Author, in his 83rd autumn, with tender, grateful, reverent memories, writes these lines for John Drinkwater with the hand that often clasped Abraham Lincoln's. Henry B. Rankin, Springfield, Illinois, October 20th, 1919.' Mr. Rankin was in Herndon's law office at Springfield when Lincoln was a partner. In North Dakota I met an old man, physically & mentally alert,

who had been one of Lincoln's bodyguard for the two years preceding the assassination at Ford's Theatre; his lifelong regret was that he had been away on leave on the fatal evening, when who knows but what he might have given a different turn to American history. And these experiences are common in the land where so short a time ago Lincoln came and went with all the frank accessibility of a democratic society. The evidence by which we know him is voluminous, precise, and vivid. From that evidence a figure has been created that has seized the imagination of mankind, and it is beyond all cavil a figure of truth. And yet the truth, this truth so commanding that it can never now be obliterated from the consciousness of our race, is at not rare intervals contested by eager investigators who hope by a myopic concentration on insignificant facts to discredit a larger verity than they know. Before considering what this verity is, let us for a moment see how these misguided enthusiasts can vex themselves.

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Now and again I receive a pamphlet of *Historical Notes* by the courtesy of a Georgian lady who compiles them. Miss Rutherford is a very industrious student, fearless in her zeal, and genuinely convinced of the justice of her cause. Which is to show that Abra-

ham Lincoln, far from being the fine fellow that we take him to be, was on the whole a pretty considerable humbug. Miss Rutherford is not the victim of irresponsible prejudices; she is a patient gleaner of evidence, cherishing over-duly perhaps what should by now be a faded animosity, but reinforcing her conclusions scrap by scrap, as tremulously persuaded as a Baconian or a Flat-Earthist. I should not presume to argue with Miss Rutherford; I suspect that in any case argument is a region beyond which she has advanced. And, further, I honestly respect the spirit with which she labours a forlorn hope. For it is that. She will never make the world believe that Lincoln was a humbug. The world has by this time elaborated its own truth about Lincoln, and this truth will never be made to square with Miss Rutherford's theories.

I select *Historical Notes* as an illustration of my argument for the very reason that they are more considered in design than is usual with such futilities; I use the word, I hope, without offence. Miss Rutherford calls her witnesses with a confidence that is not assumed, and she examines them adroitly to her own purposes. It is impossible to question her good faith. She gives her time and her energy, one may suppose a considerable amount of her means also, to what for her is a crusade against error. And she follows her in-

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spiration to remarkable issues. A recent pamphlet in her series is devoted to a contrast between the lives of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. The warmest admirer of Lincoln may still find much to respect in Davis, though with less, it may be, than the true Southern fervour. Whether a better man could or could not have been found for an office that must have been exacting beyond almost any human powers, the fact remains that Jefferson Davis fell short, and, as the event proved, disastrously short, of the requirements. But he had fine qualities of character and considerable intellectual gifts. Like Lincoln, of an undistinguished parentage, his family fortunes rose in his youth, and he became a prosperous slave-owning cotton-planter, who managed his estate with acumen and humanity. Marrying a daughter of Zachary Taylor, afterwards President of the United States, he himself went into politics, and some ten years before the Civil War was given a post in the cabinet under Franklin Pierce. For a time, also, he was a soldier, training at the great American military academy at West Point at the same time as Robert E. Lee, and served with no little distinction in the Mexican War of 1846. So that he was clearly a man of parts, one who in many of his enterprises was happy in crowning ability with success. As he showed in the great crisis

of his life, he had a fortitude that may almost be said to have amounted to greatness, but he was not a great man in the constructive sense that would have been necessary for any leader who should bring the South through to the establishment of a desperate cause. Unlike Lincoln, who always chose the best man for service irrespective of personal considerations, Davis was continually swayed in his choice by affections and antipathies, and, although this may have indicated personal loyalty, it meant, since Davis was a very imperfect judge of character and susceptible to flattery, continual political & military instability that ended in disaster for the South. Above all, Davis had none of the personal magnetism that could sway the ardours of a people in revolution. He was a recluse by habit, scholarly, introspective, neurasthenic. He was a brave patriot, with an acutely analytical mind, but he had none of the genius necessary to inspire leadership in a great adventure. His fatal defect, indeed, in such a man at such a time, was a complete absence of the adventurous spirit. The Southern material was magnificent, but it needed heroic magnetism of the first order to direct it. Such magnetism was found in Lee's military command of the Virginian army, but it was not for a moment present in Davis's control of Confederate policy and strategy as a whole. One of

the supremely tragic aspects of the Confederate story was, indeed, the subjection of Lee, who had it, to Davis who had it not, and Lee's superb forbearance in a situation of the deepest irony.

That is the impression of Jefferson Davis left after an impartial study of records. It is easy to understand Miss Rutherford's tenderness for the man who after all was the nominated leader of a cause that went splendidly to failure, and suffered so profoundly himself in its overthrow. It is easy also to sympathise with her and those who feel like her. To recognise Davis's limitations is not to fail in appreciation of much in him that approached nobility. But for his friends to contrast him with Lincoln is an incomprehensible blunder in advocacy. For Lincoln, the Lincoln that we know and that the world will always know, was greatly eminent in the qualities that Davis lacked. This has now been decided by a consensus of opinion against which it is no longer of any use to appeal. The whole story might have been written differently, but it has in fact been written so, and it is too late to alter it. Not all Miss Rutherford's sagacity nor anyone else's can rob us of the Lincoln that time has already shaped for the encouragement of mankind. She may call her witnesses with the nicest preparation, but she will con-

tinue to call them in vain. Here they parade before us in *Historical Notes* Volume II Number 2, and the evidence that they give the court is as follows. 'Lincoln was a traitor to the constitution.' We need not be too hard on that, remembering what the prejudices are. But these: 'He never answered a direct question, but always evaded it.' 'He was naturally envious.' He was 'cruel and vindictive.' 'His cunning amounted to genius.' 'He did nothing for mere gratitude & forgot the devotion of his warmest friends as soon as the occasion for their services had passed.' 'He had no reverence for great men.' And then, triumphantly, 'His views of human nature were very low,' and 'He had no heart.'

These opinions, it may be observed, are not advanced by Miss Rutherford as her own at random. She endorses them, her whole object being, indeed, to make them current; but they are drawn from her survey of acknowledged authorities, among them Herndon, Lamon & Seward. None of these was, perhaps, wholly candid in representing Lincoln, or shall we say perspicuous. Herndon loved his law-partner, but he had a somewhat befuddled if generous mind, and was not a notably sensitive judge of character. Ward Hill Lamon knew Lincoln well so far as he knew him at all, but he was unaware of the deeps and

horizons that have gone to the making of a world-story. 'Eater and drinker,' Mr. Carl Sandburg calls him, 'with a swagger of a picture-book swashbuckler out of a pirate story, but a personal loyalty of tried fighting quality.' The moods in which Lincoln had no use for him, when he was withdrawn into speculation that his vivid young companion—Lamon was Lincoln's junior by nineteen years—could not share, would readily be accounted to vanity, spiritual gloom, something formidable even to the point of 'vindictiveness and cruelty.' Seward was an accomplished gentleman, who once he had tried a fall with his chief served him loyally as Secretary of State, but there was always the lurking disappointment that not he but an uncouth small-town man from the obscure west was President. He behaved, once he had pulled himself together, very well about it, but it is no matter for surprise that a tell-tale word should now and then slip out in private talk or correspondence, or even in notes made for future use. So that Miss Rutherford's witnesses, even in her own court, might be hard enough pressed in cross-examination. The significant thing, however, is that it is from these very sources, and from others of the same nature, that the Lincoln of common acceptance has been evolved. Herndon & Lamon and Seward and the rest of them may no doubt in care-

fully selected detail be quoted to any purpose, but if we take their testimony without selection, as we ought, we find that the only purpose that it can by any means be made to serve is utterly removed from Miss Rutherford's. The world has made its own figure of Lincoln, as it does of every great man. In doing this it may have disregarded or been unaware of aspects that such scrutiny as Miss Rutherford's may discover, but this is of no consequence. In literal fact Lincoln was doubtless as far short of perfection as other men, but the blemishes that he had in common with his fellows do not concern us. Intellectual preciosity sometimes pretends that candour desires to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about its heroes. I dissent. The peccadillos and infirmities of the great may make entertaining and harmless gossip; it may even be amusing to some to know that Dr. Johnson affected dirty linen. But dirty linen on Dr. Johnson is of no more interest than it is elsewhere, and to see some profound significance in his choice is to see what isn't there. The Dr. Johnson that matters does not include the dirty linen, & to insist upon it in the name of truth is in that name to make oneself a prig. We all know that in Lincoln's nature there must have been furtive little corruptions, since he was human. But we can dis-

pense with information on that score, it being so much more readily to hand in ourselves if we want it. But there was something in Lincoln also that is never readily to hand, that is manifested only at long intervals in the affairs of men, something that was very well known to Herndon, Lamon, Seward and the others, something that from their records is now firmly fixed in the world's mind forever. Not from their records only, for while the figure that we know may take no account of trivialities that being true were yet of no advantage to the truth that matters, it is none the less founded on reality. And that reality comes to us by reports that were conceived not fantastically, but under the discipline of the original himself. It is important to remember this. The figure that we know may not coincide in all respects with the original of literal fact, but it has been fashioned from reports, written and oral, upon which that original had on the whole impressed itself faithfully. If, as we say, Miss Rutherford's witnesses & others had said in the main the sort of thing about Lincoln that she selects for her purpose, we should be justified in supposing him to have been little better than poor white trash. But in that case our universal figure could never have come into being. The fact is, however, that the witnesses did not say this sort of thing in the main; they said it

exceptionally. What they said in the main was something as far removed from this sort of thing as possible. And for saying it their authority was Lincoln. In other words, the veritable Lincoln was himself the chief collaborator in the Lincoln that the world now accepts. We may not know everything, but we know all that we need to know, and we are confident that what we know is truth. And we are not enlightened by learning that Lincoln too could stumble. We did not suppose that it could have been otherwise. But the Lincoln who means so much to us is notable for his firm gait. Let us see who this Lincoln is.

The publication of Mr. Carl Sandburg's *Prairie Years* has, I think, for the first time given Lincoln his full epic stature. Not quite this, perhaps, since Mr. Sandburg calls a halt in his story, temporarily it is to be hoped, at the point where his hero was elected to the Presidency. But otherwise, here is a final answer to all Miss Rutherfords. Here we see what is the effect of an illimitably painstaking study of every available scrap of evidence upon a finely creative mind pledged to the truth. To have read this book is not merely to agree with it, but to know with certainty that a story so passionately explored and told cannot by any perverse ingenuity be attributed to error. This indisputa-

bly is the truth. And it is truth of a loving and magnificent aspect.

Abraham Lincoln, born of pioneer parents on February 12th, 1809, in a log cabin with a dirt floor at Hodgenville, Kentucky, grew up in an environment at once stark and romantic. Almost from babyhood he had to pay his shot by incessant and heavy manual labour, picking up a little elementary education at a school that was a log hut like his own home. The Lincolns had to win their living directly from the earth; favourable weather meant a wooden bowl regularly filled, a bad season meant hunger and penury. When he was seven years old, the boy Abraham moved with his family to Little Pigeon Creek in the newly chartered territory of Indiana, and here a footing was hewn and lopped out of virgin woodland, another log home built, and the larder supplied with game from the countryside until the scantling farm, granted with clear title by the government at two dollars an acre, could begin to show its yield. The next year Abraham's mother, known to history as Nancy Hanks, died, & two years later his father had married again, bringing a widow, Sarah Bush Johnston, to preside over his precarious little establishment and look after his two children, whose numbers were now augmented by three of her own by her first marriage. Her

name is a fragrant memory in the story of Abraham Lincoln. As he came on to man's years and sometimes fell adreaming at his work, it was she who told them to let Abe go his own way as it was like to prove as good a way as another's. Not that his dreaming made any serious inroads on his efficiency, but the frontiersmen of a new world are strangely intolerant of oddness, and to his hard-driven companions the young man who sometimes went mooning about seemed a little odd. For the rest, he was a natural born hand-worker, with a lean whipcord physique that could easily hold its own in any work or horseplay that was on hand. He could be gentle, but he was never soft. The humours of that pioneer society could take a rough, sometimes even a cruel turn, and there is nothing to show that he was more squeamish than the others, though he had a sense of fair play to temper extravagance. Nothing of a bully, he never declined a challenge if he thought the odds were anything like level for the other fellow; & he was willing enough to interfere in any quarrel if he thought a crooked deal was on. He began to read, walking twenty miles out & home again to borrow a book. Friends in distant parts of the territory encouraged him, and Aesop, Defoe & Bunyan became his friends. Also he studied arithmetic; then history. He began to be em-

ployed on errands that took him far away from Tom Lincoln's cabin, trading along the Mississippi River down to New Orleans, where he saw slave-gangs being dragooned in handcuffs, with consequences that were some day to be written indelibly on the history of the United States. By the time he was twenty Abraham Lincoln was an athlete who feared no comers, a graduate in the rigours of necessity, & more travelled than most in his station of life. He had, further, acquired enough book-learning to give him a name among his folk for being 'peculiarsome.'

As he grew to maturity, the vast middle-west of which he was a native was teeming with the fertility of a new world. The spread of population and the assembling of races, the organisation of finance and the coming of the railroads, the ramifications of slavery and abolition, the drama of men and women looking westward into the wilderness and eastward to old civilisations, the quarrels of politicians and the visions of statesmen, these were matters that absorbed the grown boy's mind. Then he found a copy of *The Constitution of the United States*, and with it sundry other documents concerned with Law. Another trip to New Orleans, & further opportunity for meditating on the sale of human beings, and in 1831 we find him, independent now of home & family, serving in

a store at New Salem in Sangamon County, Illinois.

Here he at once acquired a reputation for integrity and force of character, and was soon a conspicuous figure in the little township. He was fighting hard with life, terribly determined to keep square with his conscience. When he gave a woman customer in the store six and a half cents short in change he walked six miles in his own time to repair the mistake. Here he led a company of volunteers as Captain against the Indians in the Black Hawk War. His men fought hard but told him to go to hell when he gave orders off the field. And it was here that he met and loved Anne Rutledge, was engaged to her, and watched her die of fever, a girl of twenty-two whose name has taken on a lyric beauty for ever, a beauty exquisitely captured by Edgar Lee Masters in—

> Out of me unworthy and unknown
> The vibrations of deathless music;
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath
> these weeds,
> Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
> Wedded to him, not through union,

But through separation.
Bloom forever, O Republic,
From the dust of my bosom!

As she was dying, says Mr. Sandburg, Lincoln rode out to her farm. 'They let him in; they left the two together and alone a last hour in the log house, with slants of light on her face from an open clapboard door.' The memory of that hour was a sorrow that never lost its passion.

It was in New Salem too that Lincoln first began to take part in local politics, and found, in a heap of rubbish, a copy of Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, with the results that he got himself elected to the Illinois Legislature, and became a lawyer. In 1837 he opened a law office in Springfield on a capital of seven dollars, and in debt to the tune of another thousand that he had borrowed from friends, who thought him peculiarsome but had a faith that somehow he would pay them back, which he did.

For twenty-three years he lived in Springfield, prospering in his profession, becoming more & more talked of as a personality, sometimes elected for the State Legislature and sometimes defeated, and for a time serving as Congressman at Washington. When

he first went into the town he was tough in fibre, properly ambitious, notable as he joined any company, and as likely to become President of the United States as the curate of the church down the way is to become Archbishop of Canterbury. It is said that he told friends with some seriousness that he intended to go to the White House. Doubtless some thousands of young men had the same intention. But it is an impressive thought that at all times, even to-day, while the thousands are cherishing this illusion, two or three of them will thirty years or so hence prove against all the odds that it was no illusion after all. It is like a sweepstake; in a million people someone has got to bring off a million to one chance. If Lincoln did make the boast, he was going to be justified, but in 1837 and for twenty years after there was not the smallest probability that he would be.

And yet the Springfield days were an ordered probation. The imaginative, which is not the fanciful, mind, contemplating Lincoln's place in history, is apt to see the man coming forward from obscurity to direct his country's fortunes at a supreme crisis. In a sense it is true of Lincoln as it is of Cromwell that the hour made the man, and the imagination is rightly moved by ordinances so unexpectedly asserted. The

elevation of men like these, at a sudden call, from narrow local influence to national power may well seem to be divinely appointed, and is a theme that has always stirred the poets. But close investigation generally reveals a preparation which, if it was by no means likely to lead to such an event, was necessary if the event was to be possible. And so it was with Lincoln. The obscure pioneer politician whom we see emerging from the recesses of Illinois in 1860 to take control at Washington, & after five years of authority to make an end leaving a name sweetly memorable for ever, may assume the character of a god out of the machine. But if so, he comes fully armed with experience patiently acquired during those twenty years on the Springfield circuit. His mind has been disciplined in practical knowledge of law and institutions, in debate, in understanding the needs of a hardy young community spreading with startling rapidity over a vast continent. He has learnt, too, a great deal about men, how to suffer fools at least until he is sure that nothing can bring them to a sense of their folly, how to accommodate difficulties, how to respect the other point of view, and how to tell honesty from feigning. Above all, he has already accustomed his heart to the charity for all that is presently to be his last and loveliest challenge against darkness.

It was at Springfield that Lincoln married Mary Todd, he then being thirty-three years of age. That his heart was ever greatly in the enterprise we may doubt, but Mary Lincoln could help her husband with sound advice on occasion, and displaying herself as she believed to much advantage at the White House, has taken a less conspicuous place in history. At her best she encouraged Lincoln to a belief in his own powers; at her worst she was unable to wear out his patience.

The man elected by the Republican party to the Presidency in 1860 had a few months earlier made his appearance before an audience representing the culture and intellect of the east. At Cooper Union in New York some fifteen hundred people assembled while a snowstorm swept over the city, and were astonished when a gaunt, uncouth man, inches over six feet in height, dressed in no fashion, with enormous feet and terribly conscious of his hands, stepped on to the platform. If this was the possible candidate produced by the West for supreme office, it must be allowed that he was a very strange one. Culture and intellect were almost inclined to titter in spite of good breeding. Think of the Mayflower: lines of long descent. Think of Mr. Seward. But as Mr. Lincoln went on speaking Mr. Seward seemed to matter rather less.

The mildly disdainful curiosity gave place to startled admiration. Intellect and culture needs must salute a sincerity so convincing, needs must see themselves transfigured in such homely logic, such native dignity. This man, authentically, was prophesying before them. As he made an end, the great audience forgot its decorum and surged up to the speaker in waves of enthusiasm. A new and grandly incalculable personality had come into the national life of America; had, indeed, come into history, with brief but imperishable annals to be told.

Of Abraham Lincoln's Presidency this is not the place to attempt even a summary, still less may we debate the political and martial agony by which it was conditioned. Seen in perspective, heroic resolutions always have the appearance of sublime simplicity; to the participants at the time they are entangled often in a network of intrigue that hampers if it does not destroy the heroism. Never have the confusion of motives & the shocks of interest been more violent than they were in the American Civil War, and Lincoln, as all other public men, was charged with every kind of malice and duplicity. His distinction lay in the fact that in common circumstances he conducted himself in no common way. For the

shrewdest political wits his own were an easy match, but he never allowed the unlovely necessities of office to impair his native candour or harden his native tenderness. Under every trial he remained truthful and generous. With exceptional opportunities for discovering what human harshness and perfidy could be, he never lost his faith in human goodness. Called upon daily to deal with complicated abstractions, he reduced them steadily to bare and intimate essentials, the larger figures of rhetoric having no attraction for him. Placed at the head of a great people, he thought of them always in terms of individual men & women. And so he is remembered, after all the smother has passed, simply as the man who saved the American Union, and in the process abolished slavery. Even those, if there are any, who question the ultimate wisdom of these achievements, cannot deny their greatness. He is remembered also as a man who, conducting a nation through a shattering crisis, remained warm, accessible, a friend to anyone who cared to ask for his friendship.

Lincoln was a very great man, and was conscious of his power and quality; but he never behaved or thought of himself as The Great Man. He had come through too vigilant a school for that. The stories of

his solicitude for others are many. I will tell one that I picked up, not, I think, told in print before. Early in the war when he was paying a visit to an army hospital, he came across a young soldier convalescing from wounds. The boy told him that he was going on leave for a fortnight, during which he hoped to marry a girl to whom he was engaged. Three years later a commanding officer called for a volunteer to take a dispatch through dangerous country to Lincoln at Washington. The same young man offered to go, and getting through safely was admitted at the White House. Lincoln took the envelope and, looking for a moment at the messenger, turned away before opening it and stood staring out of the window, searching his recollection. Then he turned again with 'Did you marry the girl?' That was the President of the United States in 1864. The conjunction of such grace with such eminence is our clue.

Lincoln's power came to its maturity in a time of war, and although the course of the struggle and the issues involved have now emerged in an outline upon which disagreement is scarcely possible, this war was in its time, like all other wars, mired in almost indescribable muddle and apparent futility. The end and the means to that end may always have been clear to Lincoln, but before the end was reached he

had to lead a hundred discordant energies through weary months, even years, of confusion. Often he seemed hardly to be leading them at all. His ministers, his generals, his political managers, the press—among all these were to be found patriots who were convinced that Lincoln was a fool, and that the problem was how to make his folly as inoperative as possible. Late at night he calls with his Secretary of State on McClellan, then Commander-in-Chief. McClellan is out. They wait, and at length the general returns, out of humour, hears that the President is waiting for him, and goes straight to bed. Lincoln returns home, and his Secretary remonstrates with him. It seems to Lincoln not to be a time for 'making points of etiquette and personal dignity.' He adds: 'I will hold McClellan's horse if he will win me victories.' But casual, even vacillating as he may have seemed in such incidents, Lincoln all the time was nursing his resolves and consolidating his principles. He saw everyone who called at the White House, chiefly, as he said, because 'Men moving only in an official circle are apt to become merely official—not to say arbitrary—in their ideas, and are apter and apter with each passing day to forget that they only hold power in a representative capacity.' Often his visitors came to join in the chorus of disparagement, but not

always. Mr. Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, in his admirable book on Lincoln, tells us of one who called: 'a large, fleshy man of a stern but homely countenance and a solemn and dignified carriage, immaculate dress, swallow-tailed coat, ruffled shirt of faultless fabric, white cravat, and orange-colored gloves.' Looking at him Lincoln was somewhat appalled. He expected some formidable demand. To his relief the imposing stranger delivered a brief harangue on the President's policy, closing with: 'I have watched you narrowly ever since your inauguration. . . As one of your constituents I now say to you, "do in future as you damn please, and I will support you."'

And what none of his critics realised was that, in spite of their invective, reinforced often by double-dealing, Lincoln was all the time moving in his calm, spiritual deliberation, doing as he did damn please. For there are two characteristics that we have clearly to realise if we would understand Lincoln. The first is at the very heart of his essential greatness. A lesson that history teaches us with unwearying patience, and one which is yet unheeded by many active members of society, is that the truly great man is not the extremist, however devoted his courage or picturesque his personality may be. The rebels have their

honour in the world, and rightly. Their cause is often enlightened, and they serve it often with a loyalty that is reckless of self-interest, a loyalty, it may be noted, which may be no less staunch when the cause happens to be a reactionary one. The Die-Hards of English politics are no less honourably true to a faith than the Vengeances from the Clyde. But given the admittedly rare virtue of personal fearlessness, this kind of fanaticism, whatever its purpose, is a far less majestic thing in character than the tenacity with which the really heroic men of the world have pursued a moderate course, refusing to be intimidated by furies on either side of them.

And of the great moderates in history (one might, perhaps, call them moderators) none is greater than Lincoln. His fixed aim from the first in the war was to preserve the Union; at a later stage, after long meditation, he further declared for abolition, with reasonable terms of compensation. From these two purposes nothing could seduce him, but he would at no time allow his intentions to be complicated by the demands of extremists in any party. He was deaf alike to the Vindictives and the Pacifists, who in their different ways were trying to stampede him. The Vindictives were all for destroying the South by the imposition of extreme political and material penalties.

Lincoln would have none of it. Let the South come back to the Union, and let it admit that the institution of slavery had been discredited, and the old relations should be renewed as though the war had never happened. Towards the Pacifists he was equally firm. No man was ever more pacific in nature than Lincoln himself, but no appeals to his almost agonisingly sensitive humanity could weaken his resolve until the integrity of the Union had been established, as he hoped, beyond the possibility of further attack.

The other characteristic of which we speak is Lincoln's loneliness of mind, a theme worthy of the Greek tragedians. In administrative affairs he was anxious, even at times unduly anxious, for advice, and in the routine of office he could sometimes be a little careless in the choice of deputies. But in the formation of principles he consulted nobody. When a decision involving fundamental principle had to be made, the period of Lincoln's speculation would be a long one, and while it lasted his most intimate associates could tell nothing of what he was thinking. Then suddenly his intentions would be stated in unequivocal terms, and that was an end of the matter. This gave easy play to detractors, and the opportunities were freely and not always scrupulously taken.

But Lincoln's justification was that his conclusions truly were founded upon principles, and that his intellectual understanding of principles was, in the sphere of action, the finest in the country. It is a justification that has now made a noble and durable impression upon mankind, and America has given a hero to the world.

It is sometimes said that Lincoln's story would have been less memorable had it not been so suddenly and so violently closed. Such surmise profits nobody. There is no reason to suppose that had he lived Lincoln would not have brought to reconstruction the strong and lovely qualities that he had exercised in war. History rightly takes no note of events that were and must remain unborn. And the imagination of men, fixed on reality, disregards them also. Our delight in the story of our race is not to wonder aimlessly what might have been, but to realise the true significance of what was. To the story of Lincoln we could wish to add nothing, since nothing could enrich or dignify it; and that something of its splendour might have been lost in other circumstances does not trouble our delight.